
1960s



Sports and Games

The 1960s saw professional sports finally attain dominance in the hearts of American sports fans. The overlapping seasons of professional baseball, football, hockey, and basketball offered sports fans year-round entertainment, and television broadcasting increased in sophistication to make sports coverage more exciting. It also helped that the 1960s were filled with dramatic moments and glamorous sports stars.

No one team dominated major league baseball, as seven different teams won the World Series. Perhaps the most astonishing World Series win went to the 1969 New York Mets, who had finished next-to-last in 1968. The “Amazin’ Mets,” as they were known, provided thrills for every fan who supported the under-dog. The 1960s were the decade of stars, as players like Roger Maris (1934–1985), Mickey Mantle (1931–1995), Maury Wills (1932–), Sandy Koufax (1935–), Frank Robinson (1935–), Carl Yastrzemski (1939–), and others set records and thrilled fans.

Professional football became the most popular American sport in the 1960s, surpassing baseball in attendance and television viewership figures. Men across the nation gave up their Sunday afternoons to watch the games, and for most of the decade they could choose between the National Football League (NFL) and the American Football League (AFL). The two leagues played their first championship game—called the Super Bowl—against each other in 1967, with the NFL’s Green Bay

Packers easily defeating the AFL's Kansas City Chiefs, 35–10. The most dominant team of the decade, the Packers won the next Super Bowl, too, beating the Oakland Raiders, 33–14. But Super Bowl III was a different story: The New York Jets of the upstart AFL proved the league's worth and silenced AFL detractors by beating the Baltimore Colts, 16–7, behind the heroics of quarterback Joe Namath (1943–).

The National Basketball Association (NBA) grew in popularity and size throughout the decade. Beginning the decade with just eight teams, it grew to seventeen teams by the end of the decade and in 1965 drew over five million fans to its games. The Boston Celtics were the era's dominant team, winning nine of ten NBA championships. The Celtics were led by their dominating center, Bill Russell (1934–), who had a great rivalry with fellow big man Wilt Chamberlain (1936–1999), who played for the Philadelphia Warriors, San Francisco Warriors, Philadelphia 76ers, and Los Angeles Lakers. In an era known for the gains made by African Americans, black players came to dominate the game of professional basketball. College basketball also remained very popular, and was dominated in the decade by the UCLA team coached by John Wooden (1910–2010) and, after 1967, by a seven-foot player named Lew Alcindor (1947–), who later changed his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

Other sports also drew fan's attention. The single most celebrated athlete of the decade was boxer Cassius Clay, who took the name Muhammad Ali (1942–) after winning the heavyweight crown in 1964. Ali dominated the heavyweight class for years, and he entertained the world with his witty boasts, such as "I float like a butterfly and sting like a bee." The Olympics continued to raise its profile as a sporting event, thanks to substantial television coverage and to growing corporate sponsorship of the games. Inspired by Americans' growing love of sports, in 1961 ABC-TV introduced a new style of sports show called *Wide World of Sports* which, in its famous opening lines, promised that it was "spanning the world to give you the constant variety of sports—the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat, the human drama of athletic competition."

Muhammad Ali (1942–)

On three separate occasions, Muhammad Ali won the title of heavyweight boxing champ. He was more than a fighter, however; he was simultaneously one of the most beloved and one of the most despised public figures

of his time. Ali earned his first fame in 1960 (when he was still known by his birth name, Cassius Clay), winning a gold medal at the Rome **Olympics** (see entry under 1900s—Sports and Games in volume 1), and secured his initial title by beating Sonny Liston (1932–1970) in 1964.

Ali was not the first African American boxing champ, but like **Jack Johnson** (1878–1946; see entry under 1900s—Sports and Games in volume 1) before him, Ali courted controversy on several fronts. He was a spirited soul who said and did as he pleased. He was a master of self-promotion, declaring “I am the greatest” for all to hear. This attitude rankled those white people who felt that the young champ did not “know his place” as a Negro (the accepted term for African Americans in the 1960s). They were bothered



World heavyweight champion Cassius Clay (later known as Muhammad Ali) knocks out opponent Cleveland Williams in Houston, Texas, on November 14, 1966. © ROLLS PRESS/POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES.

further when the boxer announced that he had become a Black Muslim and changed his name from Clay to Ali. Then he refused to submit to the military draft, appealing that he had a religious obligation to practice pacifism, and was convicted of draft evasion. For this final offense, he was stripped of his title by the World Boxing Association in 1967. He was condemned on editorial pages and over dinner tables across America.

Ali's conviction was overturned, however, and he returned to the ring in 1971. Before retiring a decade later, he participated in several classic ring battles with Joe Frazier (1944–2011) and George Foreman (1949–). Back in the late 1960s, Ali—despite his controversy—arguably was the most famous human on earth, a hero in Africa, in third-world nations, and in the ghettos of America. In dramatic fashion, the Parkinson's Disease-afflicted Ali lit the Olympic torch at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia. As he aged, he focused on humanitarian and civic enterprises, and his old enemies died out, Ali became one of the world's most respected and beloved sports legends.

Rob Edelman

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Dallas Cowboys

Started in 1960, the Dallas Cowboys of the **National Football League** (see entry under 1920s—Sports and Games in volume 2) soon became one of the most prominent teams in the history of all professional football,

and they endure as “America’s Team.” Few teams in league history can boast a higher national profile or a more consistent record of success.

Dozens of football legends were Cowboys, including Tom Landry (1924–2000), the team’s longtime head coach; quarterbacks “Dandy” Don Meredith (1938–2010), Roger Staubach (1942–), and Troy Aikman (1966–); running backs Tony Dorsett (1954–) and Emmitt Smith (1969–); and defensive standouts including Bob Lilly (1939–), Lee Roy Jordan (1941–), Ed “Too Tall” Jones (1951–), and Randy White (1953–). In 1980, Lilly became the first Cowboy to enter the Professional Football Hall of Fame.

The team is also known for its cheerleaders. The Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders combined sports with entertainment and set the standard for professional cheerleaders.

Rob Edelman

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Frisbee

Along with the balloon tire bicycle and the **skateboard** (see entry under 1950s—Sports and Games in volume 3), the Frisbee is a key accessory of late twentieth-century American childhood. Plastic flying discs were

marketed as the “Flyin’ Saucer” by the Pipco company in the late 1940s, but the first “Frisbee” was made by the Wham-O Toy Company in 1957. The flying disc that began life as a pie tin became popular on California beaches and never really went away.

By the late 1960s, laid-back Frisbee fans worked on throwing the Frisbee as straight and as far as possible. They also played Frisbee Golf, Ultimate Frisbee, and Freestyle Frisbee. With its trick throws, juggling, behind-the-back catches, and other flashy moves, Freestyle caught the public imagination in the 1970s. In the 1990s, Ultimate Frisbee was a growing worldwide sport, a trend that continued into the early 2000s. Despite the high-tech distractions of the twenty-first century, Frisbee remains very popular with humans. Dogs have always been the best Frisbee catchers, though.

Chris Routledge



Frisbee, a cheap sports staple for park outings. © JUPITERIMAGES/GETTY IMAGES.

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Evel Knievel (1938–2007)

Daredevil motorcycle stuntmen are a rarity, far outnumbered by auto racers, skiers, or track-and-field athletes, let alone players from all sports. For years, Evel Knievel had this field virtually all to himself. His successes—and his spectacular failures—earned him a fame saved for mainstream athletes and movie stars.

Knievel—who was born Robert Craig Knievel—had an unusually varied background. He was a ski-jump champion, a professional hockey player, a car salesman, a hunting guide, a con man, and a safecracker. He entered the profession that would earn him international fame in 1965 when he created an outfit called Evel Knievel's Motorcycle Daredevils. He won headlines on New Year's Day in 1968 when he successfully jumped his motorcycle over the fountains in front of the Caesar's Palace hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada. Even though he crash-landed and spent a month in a coma, his reputation was made. He followed up with additional jumps, on locations ranging from the Los Angeles Coliseum to Idaho's Snake River Canyon to Ohio's Kings Island, where he piloted his motorcycle over fourteen Greyhound busses.

Knievel's many crashes left his body mangled. He broke his pelvis while attempting to leap over thirteen double-decker buses at London's Wembley Stadium in 1975. The following year, he received major injuries while leaping over a tank filled with live sharks in the Chicago Amphitheater. In failing health in the last decade of his life, Knievel died in December 2007 at the age of sixty-nine.

Miniature reproductions of Knievel's Stuntcycle became a popular toy in the 1970s. He was the subject of a Hollywood film biography, *Evel Knievel* (1971), and starred as himself on screen in *Viva Knievel!* (1977). Indeed, his death-defying exploits won him veritable folk hero status.

Rob Edelman

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Joe Namath (1943–)

*New York Jets quarterback
"Broadway Joe" Namath in
1970.* © FOCUS ON SPORT/
GETTY IMAGES.



In an era when star athletes were supposed to be idealized, clean-living role models for fans young and old, Joseph William Namath was a startling exception. After starring at the University of Alabama, Namath (often nicknamed Joe Willie) became quarterback of the New York Jets, of the upstart American Football League (AFL), signing a then-record \$427,000 contract in 1964.

It was for good reason that Namath was nicknamed "Broadway Joe": he earned as many headlines for his bachelor-pad, party-boy life-style as for his exploits on the field. He gained everlasting fame, however, when he boldly—and accurately—predicted that his AFL-champion Jets would beat the highly favored Baltimore Colts, of the more established **National Football League** (NFL; see entry under 1920s—Sports and Games in volume 2), in **Super Bowl** (see entry under 1960s—Sports and Games in volume 4) III in 1969. The Jets' 16–7 victory not only proved to the NFL that its AFL "baby brothers" were fast maturing—the two leagues ended up merging soon afterwards—but affirmed that Namath could back up his boasting with on-field heroics.

Namath had a stellar career with the Jets from 1965 to 1976, and retired after spending the 1977 season with the Los Angeles Rams. He was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1985.

Rob Edelman

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Super Bowl

Since 1967, professional football's annual championship game, dubbed the Super Bowl, has been played on a Sunday in January. At first just a novelty, the game has grown in popularity to such a degree that it now stands as something of an unofficial national holiday. There are Super Bowl parties from coast to coast, and the game is televised around the world to enthusiastic audiences.

The first Super Bowl pitted the Green Bay Packers of the **National Football League** (see entry under 1920s—Sports and Games in volume 2) against the Kansas City Chiefs of the American Football League. The game was designed to settle the score between the rival leagues, each vying for national supremacy. The Packers won that game, and the following one, but in 1969 the AFL's New York Jets created the first Super Bowl sensation (in the first of the games to be officially called the "Super Bowl") with a shocking upset of the NFL's Baltimore Colts. The surprising outcome forced the NFL to reconsider its opposition to merging with the AFL. A year later, the two leagues became one.

With no rival league to challenge it, the NFL grew in popularity, and so did the Super Bowl. Now crafted to match the playoff winner in each of two conferences, the game is played in a different city each year and attracts huge crowds and high TV ratings. The football

contests themselves have often been unimpressive, but the “scene” surrounding the game, including celebrities, elaborate halftime shows, and widespread betting on the outcome, have turned the Super Bowl into a national extravaganza. **Television** (see entry under 1940s—TV and Radio in volume 3) advertisers, attracted by the lure of enormous TV audiences, began paying top dollars for commercial time on the network broadcast. As a result, the Super Bowl became a kind of showcase for the best and most expensive TV ads. The annual “Bud Bowl” contests, Apple Computer’s memorable futuristic “1984” ad, and the Pets.com sock puppet were just a few of the famous commercials to debut during Super Bowl telecasts.

Among the Super Bowl’s most notable performers have been Joe Montana (1956–), the San Francisco 49ers quarterback who led his team to three Super Bowl victories; **Joe Namath** (1943–; see entry under 1960s—Sports and Games in volume 4), the Jets quarterback who guaranteed victory in Super Bowl III; John Elway (1960–), who led the Denver Broncos to back-to-back wins in the 1990s; and Tom Brady’s (1977–) thrilling victory over the Carolina Panthers in Super Bowl XXXVIII to win his second ring. With the advent of **satellite** (see entry under 1950s—The Way We Lived in volume 3) TV, the Super Bowl continues to grow in popularity and attracts ever-increasing worldwide audiences.

Robert E. Schnakenberg

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Twister

The ultimate way to make guests relax and start laughing at a party, Twister is a game in which players turn a spinner that tells them which hand or foot to place on which colored circle on the large game board (a thin floor mat).



Glastonbury Festival-goers in England attempt to play the world's largest game of Twister. © EDWARD J. WESTMACOTT/ALAMY.

Players' arms and legs become tangled, leading to falls and laughs. The object of the game is to be the last player to lose his or her balance.

Twister was released by the **Milton Bradley Company** (see entry under 1900s—Sports and Games in volume 1) in 1966 and was introduced to the American public on *The Tonight Show* (see entry under 1950s—TV and Radio in volume 3) on NBC. When viewers watched the show's host, **Johnny Carson** (1925–2005; see entry under 1960s—TV and Radio in volume 4), play the game with glamorous movie star Eva Gabor (1919–1995), it prompted three million people to go buy their own Twister game.

A fun game for children, Twister also appeals to adults, who have invented variations such as combat Twister which involves actively trying to push other players off balance. Twister has appeared in many films and **television** (see entry under 1940s—TV and Radio in volume 3) shows, notably the 1991 film *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey*, where the heroes play a hilarious game of Twister with Death.

Tina Gianoulis

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Wide World of Sports

As **television** (see entry under 1940s—TV and Radio in volume 3) sets were becoming common in American households during the 1950s, individual sporting events made for popular, low-cost programming. Then, at the dawn of the 1960s, *Wide World of Sports*, also known as *ABC's Wide World of Sports*, debuted. The show was a new type of sports program. Rather than focus on one sport, it presented a variety of athletic events in one show. Each week, *Wide World of Sports* transported the viewer across the United States and around the world. The show featured many athletes who otherwise would not be seen on television: bobsled racers, bodybuilders, gymnasts, figure skaters, ski jumpers, surfers, swimmers, divers, auto racers, stunt motorcyclists, rodeo performers, and track-and-field athletes. All the while, the show spotlighted the human side of sports. In addition to presenting races, bouts, and meets (often live via satellite), *Wide World of Sports* revolutionized sports coverage by including “up close and personal” features on athletes. The show’s rallying cry, “The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat,” not only became one of the most familiar catchphrases on TV but captured the essence of athletic competition.

Over the years, many high-profile sportscasters were associated with *Wide World of Sports*, including Frank Gifford (1930–), Chris Schenkel (1923–2005), Howard Cosell (1918–1995), Bud Palmer (1920–), and Keith Jackson (1928–). The one sports commentator most closely associated with the show, however, was Jim McKay (1921–2008). He was on hand for the very first broadcast, which aired on April 29, 1961, and featured the Drake Relays, from Des Moines, Iowa, and the Penn Relays, from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (relays are track-and-field events). Across the decades, McKay traveled over 4.5 million miles to cover events for the program, reporting on over one hundred different sports in forty-plus countries and across the United

States. McKay earned further fame as a longtime host of the **Olympics** (see entry under 1900s—Sports and Games in volume 1). In 1968, he became the first sportscaster ever to win an Emmy Award, for his work on *Wide World of Sports*.

The show's format was the brainchild of Boone Arledge (1931–2002), the future ABC Sports and News president. The show ran for ninety minutes on Saturdays, and occasionally appeared on Sundays. Sporting events that later merited their own separate coverage—the Wimbledon tennis tournament, World Cup soccer, the British Open golf tournament—first aired on *Wide World of Sports*.

The success of *Wide World of Sports*, and other ground-breaking endeavors such as ***Monday Night Football*** (see entry under 1970s—Sports and Games in volume 4), helped solidify the status of ABC as the major network dominating sports coverage. With the rise of **ESPN** (see entry under 1970s—TV and Radio in volume 4) as an all-day sports network, *Wide World of Sports* began losing its shine in the late 1980s. On January 3, 1998, it was announced that the show had been canceled. On April 29, 2001, ABC aired a two-hour-long fortieth anniversary retrospective. *Wide World of Sports*' fiftieth anniversary was honored with a week-long tribute on the cable network ESPN Classic in 2011.

Rob Edelman

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